

SEEING GOD'S KINGDOM DIFFERENTLY

Texts: Luke 14:15-24; Micah 4:1-4

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Introduction

Here's a question. When Jesus came into the world preaching the good news of the gospel what did he say?

- “Believe in the name of Jesus Christ and you will spend eternity with God in heaven.”
- “The time has come. The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”
- “Here are the secrets to living the good and righteous life. Pay attention; there will be a quiz.”

The answer is “b”, Jesus came preaching the kingdom. But if he came preaching a kingdom do we know what he was preaching about? What's the picture in your head when you think about a Kingdom of God?

When I think of a kingdom, I see a massive castle with a drawbridge and a moat. The message is clear. A defense is needed against the barbarian hoards. So access is limited – we need to know who's coming in and who's going out.

Or maybe you think of brave knights of the roundtable going forth to the bidding of the lord of the castle. Kingdoms are about bloody combat and victory over the evildoers.

Or maybe you simply think of the church. Isn't the church the “Kingdom of God”, whatever kingdom might mean?

Jesus didn't spend much time giving detailed definitions of the Kingdom. He was more interested in the pictures people carried in their heads and hearts than with the explanations they made with their mouths.

So let's see the Kingdom, or see it differently, his way. Why give a definition when you can tell a story?

- 1. “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests.” The folks reclining about the dining room table with Jesus would have known right away what we do not. The “certain man” is God. And the “banquet” is the meal of celebration God will eat with his people at the end of the age.**

Our host had already invited many guests – the Jewish people had known for centuries that they were beloved by God and expected seats at this party at the end of the world.

So our host tells his servant to go to the guests and tell them that the food is ready “now”. The waiting is over, the wine is poured and the table is set.

Jesus the servant is knocking on the doors of the already invited. *“You said you would come, so come now. It’s urgent you know. The host has kept his promises, he’s reserved your seats, he wants you to enjoy his best. Now.”*

In Jesus God is telling us his Kingdom is urgent, because it is now. With the arrival of the servant, the kingdom comes. And accepted invitations are useful only if they are followed by faithful responses.

In Jesus the kingdom comes. Where Jesus goes, who Jesus touches, and to whom he makes his call the kingdom of God comes. Do you feel that? I think it’s hard for the people of the church to hang on to the urgency of the Kingdom. Jesus preaches that with him everything has changed and will continue to change - while many of us desperately want tomorrow for the church to work pretty much like yesterday, with a minimum of change and bother.

Every Sunday we pray the prayer Jesus taught us saying “Thy Kingdom come...” It’s an urgent prayer and we half-way mean it and half-way don’t; the way a sleepy person hears the alarm clock and reaches for the snooze button at the same time. Still, the servant speaks saying, *“Come for everything is now ready.”* But are we?

- 2. It appears that good many of the invited guests weren’t ready. “But they all alike began to make excuses.” It seems that everybody on the “A” list had something better to do.**

We don’t have time today to examine all the excuses made to the servant when he came to call. Suffice it to say they are best ridiculous and at worst a deliberate put-down toward the host.

You mean to tell me you bought a field you've never seen, purchased five yoke of oxen you've never watched plow, or got married in between the time you said you'd come to my banquet and I got the beef on the table? Either you're a fool or you really don't want to be here.

The offense isn't lost on the master of the banquet. He's steamed. But it's what he does next that's really amazing. He calls the servant:

Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.

The kingdom of God isn't just urgent. It's incredibly gracious. The original guests misunderstood the character of the banquet. Nobody has a seat at the table because they deserve it; only the mercy of the master will get you there.

Suddenly the Kingdom isn't just for the "A" list people anymore; those who supposedly knew enough to show up. It's extended to the people on the margins of Jewish life – those who've stood on the outside of the people of God their whole lives looking in who say to themselves, "There's no room there for me."

The invitation of the Kingdom isn't limited. How could it be when it is delivered by a servant who was known to spend time with sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes?

But the house of the master still isn't full. He calls the servant again:

Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in so that my house will be full.

Had you been there listening to Jesus you'd have known what he meant. It's not just the marginal Jews the servant is inviting to the Kingdom. It's the Gentiles; those farthest away of all! That's you, me and what we've come to call the church.

The Kingdom is an astonishing invitation to be gathered around the table in the Father's house. A reply is required from the guest but the invitation goes to all.

And we the church are those people who have been called by the servant to make clear that gracious invitation to the world. We are not the Kingdom of God; just a few of the guests. Just the people who have been given the clue that it has arrived in Jesus.

I really hope that we all leave here today with a bad case of urgent grace, and that it spreads much faster than the swine flu. If we are not being undone and reworked by the graciousness of God, his urgency will remain a mystery to us.

4. And don't miss this. The servant, who is told to take the invitation to the streets and alleys of the Jewish town, and the roads and country lanes of the non-Jewish world, is told to "make them come in".

The invitation is not, "The master is having a party, come if you like." It's "the master is having a party and you simply must come. Let me bring you."

Before Jesus the hope of Israel for non-Jews can be seen in a scripture like our text from the prophet Micah. On the last day, the mountain of the Lord's temple, Mt. Zion, will be raised above all the hills, and people of the world will stream toward it. From that great temple to those gathered people the law of God will go forth and there will be peace and security in the world.

It's a gracious picture of a God who will make himself available to whoever wants to come. It's what I call "centripetal hope". Centripetal force – like gravity – is the force of attraction. If you build it they will come.

But Jesus stood that hope on its head. *This is the Kingdom, it has arrived in me; now go to people and compel them to come to the party.* He doesn't mean coerce or abuse them into accepting the invitation. He means be prepared to overcome their objection that such a gracious invitation surely can't include them. (Because grace really is unbelievable.) Smile, take them by the arm, and offer to bring them to the banquet. It isn't an accident that our church motto is "Bring, Grow, Send" and not "Come if you like, Grow, Send".

Instead of being a *centripetal* church Jesus invites us to be a *centrifugal* one – in which the movement is from the church to the world where we go to invite people into the kingdom. One that is designed more to push insiders to go into the world than to attract outsiders to leave it. One that knows that the kingdom of God is wherever the Spirit of Christ is at work.

If you want to experience some centrifugal force, the next time you go to the county fair take your Dramamine and get on one of those rides that spin and force you to the outside. Heaven knows where you could wind up if something wasn't holding you back.

Heaven knows where we could wind up if something wasn't holding us back. We ought to dream that Kingdom dream for a while. And then let's do all we can to make sure that whatever is holding back the spread of the Kingdom of God in our world, it's not the church.

Conclusion

An urgent, gracious, centrifugal kingdom; or one with high walls, deep moats, and closely guarded draw bridges. We live in anxious, dangerous times and it is ever so tempting to hope more in the practical kingdom than the coming biblical one.

But we are not the first Christians who have felt economic difficulty, political uncertainty and international anxiety and had to decide whether to be servants in the Kingdom of God or settle for a safer, and lesser, vision.

But decide we must. The master has called. The wine is poured, the table is set, and the banquet is now ready. Somebody needs to bring the guests.